

Running by moonflowers

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: A Tiny Grain of Angst, Canon-Typical Violence, Dubious Science, Fluff, Getting Together, God they're both idiots, M/M, Mild Sexual Content, San Junipero Influences, Shared Consciousness, Steve Needs a Hug, because i can't help myself, lab experiments, monster fighting, temporary memory loss

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-23

Updated: 2018-04-19

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:42:03

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 9

Words: 20,912

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

One minute he's fighting the latest horror the Upside Down has to offer, and the next... well, he's not sure. But his head hurts and he's in a town full of people he doesn't know, and everything *before* feels distant, like it belongs to somebody else. Then he meets Billy. Who's a complete pain in the ass, by the way, but who Steve is inexplicably drawn to all the same. But as they let themselves fall deeper, the headaches get worse and more and more of *before* starts to slip in through the cracks.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I was super late to the party and binge watched all of Black Mirror the other week. Predictably, I loved San Junipero, and me and my housemate both got instant Stranger Things feelings about it - also Yorkie looks like the child of Nancy and Barb, fight me. Naturally I was like hey what if Billy and Steve. I probably could have used the exact plot of the episode and it would have worked, but I wanted to Stranger Things it up, so it's more influenced by it than full on AU. You definitely don't need to have watched it to get this fic, but I would rec that episode in particular anyway because *damn*.

"How the *fuck* are you so cool about this Harrington?" Hargrove yelled at him as the two of them continued to fight off the swarm of what Steve was already privately calling 'demobugs' - thanks Dustin - that was attacking them. "What the fuck are these things?" He heard a dull thwack as the crowbar Hargrove had grabbed from the trunk of Steve's car took out another one.

"Okay, first off," Steve called over his shoulder, swinging his bat at another approaching bug, wincing at the burst of green goo that covered his hand when he struck it, "I am not cool with this Hargrove, so, so not cool. And second..." he took a moment to think *why me*, "you remember that night at the Byers'?"

He heard Hargrove snort, denim covered back towards him as he savagely fought off another demobug buzzing around their heads. "Yeah, the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"Now is really not the time for me to be fucking laying all of this out for you - " he yelped and side-stepped as one of the bastards tried to take a chunk out of his arm. He should have called Hopper, or at least told Nance or Dustin he was heading out to the woods to check up on the weird, Upside Down-ish looking thing they'd found the week before; a lumpy, grey green mass wedged between two trees.

Nest, it turned out, would have been the right word for it, considering the big angry bugs that had flown out and straight at Steve's face as soon as he'd parked up. Honestly, it'd been just another night he'd had time to kill before picking up the kids from the arcade, the drive and the walk something to keep him busy. He hadn't been banking on stumbling across Hargrove out for a evening stroll in the woods too, or the thing that they'd found *actually* being something from the Upside Down, Jesus.

"Wait," Hargrove straightened up after smacking another bug away from his face, and yeah alright, Steve was sort of glad he'd happened to be there - if he hadn't, he would've been bug food by now, "*that* was about *this*?" He gestured to the crumpled, slimy bodies of the fucked up bugs they'd killed. "What the actual fuck, Harrington?" Luckily they'd had the time to grab the bat and crowbar from the trunk of the car before they were in real trouble, and for once he was grateful Hargrove's instinct leaned towards fight rather than flight.

"Uh huh," Steve grunted as the bat thudded wetly into another demobug, the same flower-shaped, tooth-covered face as the ones that haunted his dreams tearing under the force and drag of the nails. "That's why we didn't tell you any more," he pushed his hair out of his face, grimacing as he felt green goo smear over his forehead, "top secret government shit and all."

"Well fuck."

The buzzing had stopped, the last of the demobugs falling silent at Steve's feet. He gripped his bat, still on the defensive - he didn't trust those goddamn things to stay dead - as he made a quick study of the mess of goo and broken, skeletal wings and giant insect legs on the ground. Satisfied, he looked up to see Hargrove grinning at him, eyes wild and bright, hair matted with green goop from the bugs. His confidence was contagious; Steve felt decidedly less awful than he usually did after this sort of shit happened, the two of them panting and covered in demobug entrails, riding a smug sort of high. They'd won.

"Yep." Steve barely had time to smile back before -

"Freeze!"

He flinched, blinking and squinting against the sudden lights in his eyes, glare harsh between the dark trees, faltering and almost dropping the bat.

"Drop your weapons!"

Under the circumstances, and the very definite click of guns ready to fire, Steve thought it probably best to do as he was told. He ducked down to drop the bat.

"Are you serious?" he heard Hargrove spit at him, "after those *things*, we can't just - "

"Do it, Hargrove," Steve hissed back.

A moment of silence before he heard the thump of Hargrove's crowbar hitting the earth too. By that time, his eyes had gotten accustomed to the glare of the torchlight, enough for him to see they were surrounded by people in full riot gear without any obvious insignia, each one with a gun trained on them. The lab, then. Shit.

"Listen, we - "

"Quiet!"

"What the fuck is this, Harrington?"

"I said quiet!"

Steve was starting to panic, eyes flicking around the trees in search of an escape route, when he saw - shit. One of the bugs was twitching, straightening out its twisted wings, and *fuck* it wasn't dead. "Wait," Steve held up his hands in surrender, "wait, it's not - "

Before he could finish, one of the men gave the order and another fired, splattering the bug to nothing but a pile of mush on the ground. Steve flinched at the sudden gunfire, ears ringing long after it stopped, long enough that he didn't hear the next order given. Hargrove must have though, as he took one single, decisive step towards Steve before the dart hit his neck. He sucked in a sharp breath, eyes wide and still on Steve as he fell to the floor, hand fumbling weakly at his throat.

"Fuck, Billy!" Steve forgot about the circle of soldiers armed to the teeth as he stumbled towards his slumped body, but he was only half way there before he heard a whistling sound, felt a stinging in his neck, and he hit the ground.

#

Steve was in town. It was evening, light spilling from diners and bars out onto the street, from passing cars and the open doors of the movie theatre. There were kids everywhere, calling out to each other and rushing in and out of the stores, a guy in a nearby car blasting out Madonna as two girls hopped into the back seat. Everything was blandly familiar; the same, easily recognisable brands and storefronts and songs and movie posters you'd see in any small town. He walked slowly along the sidewalk, a little disorientated, watching wide-eyed as the night life played out around him. Preoccupied by the bustling street, he wasn't looking where he was going, and tripped. Cursing and feeling like an idiot - though no one seemed to have noticed - he righted himself, and looked down to see what he'd caught his foot on. It was a gross kind of plant, green grey and slimy, crawling up through the cracks in the concrete. Once he'd noticed it, he could see them all over the place; up the sides of buildings and twisted around parked cars, thick vines with big, pointy-petalled flowers. They felt familiar too, but not in the safe, comforting way of the burger joints and billboards selling soda and cigarettes. In a way that made him feel very... well, not good. Unease was just beginning to get the better of him, back rigid and hands clenching at his sides like he should have been holding something, when a passing car honked its horn and yanked him out of his spiralling thoughts. He span around as the car sped past, just in time to see a guy decked out in denim and leather and wearing sunglasses - *at night* - with a girl on each arm step into a club on the corner. Dazed as he was, it seemed as good a place to go as any, so he crossed the street and followed them in.

Inside was packed out, the dancefloor full of people jumping about to Wham!, lined up along the bar or sitting in the booths, lit up flashing shades of pink and yellow. He couldn't see the guy he'd followed in, but on giving the place a quick look over, his attention caught on the cluster of arcade games in the corner. The dim thought of *the party would like that* drifted to the front of his mind, but it crumbled away

again before he could linger on it. In an attempt to get his bearings, he wandered over to the games, drawn to them, and trailed his fingers absently over the buttons and flashing lights. There was a twinge of pain at the front of his head, right between his eyes, and he was hit with the sudden, panicked thought of - *I have to pick them up, I said I'd be at the arcade at 9, I said I'd pick them up* - before it was gone again, leaving him shaky and blinking down at Dig Dug. The unease from earlier on returned; he tried to shake it off and headed over to the bar. Nothing a drink couldn't fix, right?

Notes for the Chapter:

I've been off my face with a cold all week, so I've ignored all other responsibilities and done this instead.

I know a couple people have played with the idea before, but hopefully this is a little different again.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

I forgot to say last chapter - the title is from Running by No Doubt, because I was listening to it a lot and it gives me Steve Feelings ok.

This chapter - Steve has a minor sexual identity crisis, and things continue to be fucking weird.

Steve ordered a beer, and the girl behind the bar slid one over. She didn't ask for money, just gave him a wink before moving on to the next customer. Normally he would have questioned it, but his wallet wasn't in his pocket - a fact which didn't seem to worry him as much as it maybe should have - and he figured it'd be dumb to look a gift horse in the mouth. The bottle was wet with condensation, tiny drops of water rolling down the glass and leaving a ring on the counter. But it wasn't cold when he picked it up, and the brown glass was dry under his palm.

"Make that two," said a voice to his left. Steve looked up sharply to see the guy from earlier, the one he'd seen walking into the club with girls hanging off of him, leaning all casual against the bar and looking him slowly up and down. Steve's head throbbed again as the guy leered at him, running his tongue suggestively over his teeth. He looked a little familiar, but then kids into that scene all had the same kind of look going on, right? A lot of hair, denim and leather, jewellery... his eye caught on the flash of a necklace. Either way, he looked *good*, and it was such an unexpected thought that Steve really didn't know what to do with it.

"You're staring," he said, thinking it was maybe best to just be blunt, and took a sip of his beer in the hopes of numbing the headache. It barely tasted of anything. He frowned at the label, making a note not to order that brand again - it was the blandest fucking beer he'd ever had.

"Yeah," the other guy said, not even bothering to deny it, eyes not leaving Steve as he took a swig of his beer, "what about it?"

"Nothing," Steve said, feeling his face get hot as he returned the guy's look, smiling a little as he visibly puffed out his chest under Steve's scrutiny.

"What, no one ever gave you the eye before?" he said. "I find that hard to believe."

"No, it's not that..." Steve said slowly, smile fading as he tried to dredge up vague memories of girls smiling shyly at him across classrooms, by the lockers, from the seat next to him in his car, by a pool?

"Then what?" the guy said, eyebrow raised expectantly, as Duran Duran started playing and more people flooded onto the dance floor. Steve liked them, he had the cassette in his car. The thought had him suddenly worried about where he'd parked up; he didn't remember driving, but how else would he have gotten into town? But then it was gone again, cut short by a clink of glass as the boy set his beer on the counter and stood. "Come dance."

Steve frowned. "What, together?"

"Yeah. You afraid, pretty boy?"

"No," Steve said, squirming a little under the guys undivided attention, and annoyed at himself for letting it get to him. He usually would have brushed it off with a smile, a sarcastic comment and without a second thought. *Pretty boy*. "I'm just - I'm not gunna dance with a dude. I don't have a death wish, thanks."

"You got a problem with it?" The other guy said, suddenly on the defensive, shoulders squared up and nostrils flared, fists clenched ready for a fight.

"Of course not, Jesus," Steve said, holding a hand up. "I think you're - there's just a lot of people here, is all." As good looking as this guy might have been, Steve wasn't a complete idiot.

He snorted and relaxed again, fingers unclenched and reaching to tug at Steve's jacket. "No one here cares, come on."

Still feeling dazed and weird and everything making less sense by the

minute, Steve thought *fuck it*, rolled his eyes and followed the guy out onto the dance floor. They moved together, not touching but close, Steve's eye catching on the glint of his earring, the way his smile widened as he laughed at Steve's attempt at dancing, the sweat on his bared chest where his shirt was barely buttoned up halfway. Steve could feel himself loosening up muscle by muscle, actually enjoying himself and moving with more enthusiasm, eyes on the other guy's face as it caught the flashing lights, pink blue yellow. His hand was on Steve's hip, squeezing, two fingers on the denim of his waistband and the rest on the skin just above it, hot and sure.

There was a party, he was dancing with a pretty girl, and everything was like it should be. Then she was mad, mopping at a watery red stain spreading across the white of her dress. She was yelling at him, and it was all just bullshit. Bullshit, bullshit.

Fuck. His head had started to hurt again. The guy moved closer, tongue darting out to run over his bottom lip, other hand moving to rest at the small of Steve's back. Without thinking about it, Steve brought his hand up to curl into the guy's denim jacket, pulling himself closer, their hips together, pleased when he noticed his eyes widen in surprise at Steve's boldness. But then his head was full of that girl again, her arms in the air as they danced, only now he was dancing with a *dude*, and it wasn't right, it wasn't him, and - He panicked and jerked himself out of the other guy's grip, ignoring his shouting as he shoved his way through the crowd to stumble out the back door of the club. It was raining, but he couldn't feel it. Everything just felt cool and damp and close, like the back of an old cupboard left to get mouldy. His clothes felt clammy against his skin, as though they were wet when he'd put them on and left them to dry as he wore them, stiff and uncomfortable. He leant against a dumpster, not sure if he felt better or worse for being alone. Not that he had long to dwell on it - the fire exit banged open, the boy pausing for a moment before he spotted him and swaggered over.

"Hey," he said, standing in front of Steve where he was still slumped against the dumpster. The rain didn't seem to be hitting him either, though he looked just as uncomfortable as Steve did, breath clouding in the cold he couldn't quite feel. He jammed his hands into his jean pockets, shirt still unbuttoned, and Steve watched his necklace sway

and settle against his skin. "What's with that deer in the headlights look? Didn't think I'd follow you out here, huh?"

Honestly, Steve hadn't really thought about it at all. He'd just needed to get out, so he had. He said nothing. The guy heaved a put-upon sigh, and sat down heavily next to him on the dumpster. "Billy."

"What?"

"My name, you dipshit. Billy."

"Oh, right. Steve." Things might have been a little muddled, but that much he was sure of.

He nodded. "Why'd you run?"

Steve shrugged, his shoulder bumping gently against Billy's. "People were looking. Y'know, two guys..." It sounded weak even to his own ears, and when he thought back on it properly, he didn't actually remember anyone eyeing them with the curiosity or distaste he might have expected.

"It's a party, no one's judging," Billy said, as though that solved everything, "and everyone in there was too drunk to spare us a second look." He frowned, the barest wrinkle between his eyes, as though the notion seemed just as strange to him as it did to Steve, before it was quickly smoothed over into a greasy smile again. "You never danced with a guy before?"

"Nope. That obvious, huh?" Steve paused, swept a hand through his hair. "You?"

"Once or twice," Billy winked at him lasciviously, and Steve couldn't help but huff out a laugh at how overdone it all was. This guy was funny, and yeah kind of a dick, but he'd cared enough to follow him outside and make sure he was okay. He was interesting, a blip on the radar, a fork in the road Steve thought he might need to take. And his eyes were so fucking blue, it was crazy. "Come back in and give another go."

"I can't," Steve made himself look away, down at his shoes and the trash scattered on the ground. One of the gross vines ran weakly

along the edge of the road, thin and yellowing, flowers shrivelled. "My parents..." he trailed off, not sure what he'd been going to say. He could remember their house, their street, but he couldn't quite get their faces right. And what he did remember properly he felt oddly detached from - not like a dream, that would be too personal - more like it was someone else's life he was looking at.

"What they don't know can't hurt 'em."

Steve looked up to see Billy smirking at him again, felt his hand wrap around the top of Steve's thigh, fingers firm on the inseam of his jeans. Something jolted low in his stomach, made him flush hot and his dick jump in his pants. His breath caught and Billy saw it, smile widening, sharp and dangerous, and Steve fought the impulse to kiss it right off his face. He pushed up into Billy's grip, just as desperate to get closer as he was to get away, and wasn't that a fucking revelation.

"I can't - " his head throbbed again, and he was... he didn't like guys. Unless he did? Shit, he couldn't get anything straight in his head. It was like trying to look at himself through a sheet of fog or in a shattered mirror - everything either blurry or broken up into shards, clear enough but useless on their own, and only ever a reflection.

"Hey," Billy said gently, "where'd you go?" He reached hesitantly to touch Steve's face, rough tips of his fingers brushing his cheek. Steve leaned into it for a moment, the fleeting gesture of comfort welcome, before -

Billy was above him, face red with anger and darkening with bruises, blood on his teeth and eyes wild, hair stuck to his neck with sweat; he was yelling, screaming, fist slamming into Steve's face over and over until he couldn't think, couldn't breathe. His head hurt worse than ever, another bright burst of pain between his eyes where it had been on and off all night, but also with the throb of bruises long since faded and cuts long since healed. The kids were screaming and everything going dark at the edges...

He almost fell over in his rush to pull away from Billy and far out of his reach, breathing hard and almost bent double on the sidewalk as he waited for the pain to recede. "I can't," he managed to pant out, "I - sorry."

The soft, concerned look on Billy's face moments ago when he'd reached out to touch Steve's face was gone, once more hard and sneering. "Your loss pretty boy." He pushed himself up from the dumpster and stalked off back into the club without a backwards glance, leaving Steve alone in the alley outside trying to regain his breath and wondering if he'd ever had a night more messed up than this.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've read this through so many times and I couldn't quite wrangle it to how I wanted. Hopefully it reads OK to you guys.

Some paraphrasing from the plot of San Junipero this chapter and the next couple because they wear it so well, just so you know it isn't all me.

3. Chapter 3

**Run,
Running all the time,
Running to the future
With you right by my side.**

#

There was an odd period of nothingness he couldn't quite place; similar to the oppressive few moments of wakefulness between long hours of fevered sleep when he'd once had the flu. The space around him felt dark and heavy, loaded with something he couldn't see. He couldn't move either, but felt his chest heave in shallow, shuddering breaths, quiet under the faint beeping and low voices from close by. Then it was gone again, and forgotten.

#

When Steve came too again, it was still dark. But it felt like a different night to the last one he remembered. It was earlier for one thing, the sun only just gone down and sky paler along the horizon as people poured into the bars and diners, neon lights flickering on even as he watched. The gross plant things were still there, so thick in some parts it was as though they were holding the buildings together, in others so weak and stringy they were barely noticeable, like an afterthought. Either way they made him uneasy, and he walked a little faster, giving them a wide berth. His hands twitched for want of a weapon he didn't have.

He knew where he was headed - there was only one place he could consider as his first port of call - the same bar as the night before. Because irritatingly, the guy - *Billy* - he'd met was the closest thing to a friendly face he had in the eerie little town, and he wanted the comfort of something familiar. So sue him. He passed a store full of televisions, though most didn't seem to be working, and checked his reflection in the window. He always paid attention to his appearance, it didn't mean anything. It wasn't like it was for Billy.

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, buddy," he mumbled to himself

as he tugged on the front of his hair to get it to sit right.

Pretty pointless though, since his head was full of *him*, full of how good he looked and how well he knew it, hand burning on Steve's hip, licking his lips and baring his teeth, always drawing attention to his mouth, the concern on his face when Steve's head was hurting. The brief image of him Steve had seen, all anger and bloody knuckles and wild eyes... that didn't bother him so much anymore. Sure, it had freaked him out last night when his head wasn't on straight, but he was feeling more grounded tonight. Besides, wasn't real, was it. The real Billy was the one he'd danced with, who'd followed him out into the rain to make sure he was okay, the one that mattered. His head had been playing all kinds of tricks on him, and he'd ignore that particular one right along with the rest. Eventually, he made himself look away from his reflection, stop fussing with his hair, and kept on towards the club. He wasn't sure what he wanted out of the night, other than to see him again. Despite his panic over what it was exactly he'd wanted from Billy the night before, he knew he wanted to see him.

The club was much the same as it had been last time, packed out and lively, arcade games beeping and flashing in the corner as kids bopped about, Michael Jackson fading into Madonna. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. Billy was leaning on the far end of the bar, talking to some guy. He looked much the same as the night before too, jeans tight and half his chest on display, flash of a smile and flash of an earring. Steve swallowed. Billy happened to glance his way then and their eyes met, smirk sharpening when he saw Steve watching him. He took the guy he was talking to by the hand and led him out onto the dance floor, a dull pulse of what Steve was pissed to realise was jealousy in his chest as Billy drew the other boy in close to dance. He draped himself along the guy's back like a cat as *Like A Virgin* continued to play, chin resting on his shoulder, hips rocking purposefully against him, getting real close, grinning and staring at Steve the whole time like he was trying to prove a point. *Asshole*. Steve glared right back, not willing to give him the satisfaction, although it only seemed to encourage him. Billy kept it up until the end of the song, before ducking to whisper something into the guy's ear, tongue flicking pointedly over his lips before he spoke. Then he slipped off alone through the crowd and into the

bathroom. Steve didn't think twice before he followed.

Billy was waiting for him, leaning with exaggerated casualness against the counter, shoulders rolled back and hips angled forward, looking almost bored. Steve saw himself stop abruptly in the mirror behind him, sparing a moment to be annoyed with himself for how eager he looked before his attention was back on Billy. The chequered tiles along the back wall were cracked, urinals choked with vines. Neither of them said anything about it.

"Well well well," Billy said, "was wondering if you'd show."

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said, bristling already. He should have known Billy wasn't going to make it easy. "Look, I shouldn't have brushed you off yesterday. That isn't what I want, not really. I just - I don't know how to..."

"How to what?" Billy drawled, looking as though he was thoroughly enjoying Steve's discomfort.

Steve sighed and scrubbed a hand through his carefully arranged hair. "Fucking give me a break okay? I haven't done this sorta thing with a guy before."

Billy flashed his teeth in a feral smile. "I'm honoured."

"You're an asshole," Steve folded his arms, tried and failed to look stern.

"Yeah." Billy tilted his head, considering. "Want to get out of here?"

#

They left the club and walked on through to the edges of town, stores and houses getting thinner on the ground, streets quieter and dimly lit, gaps where the sidewalk had been broken up by the vines.

"I hate these things," Billy said, taking a savage kick at one of the thick grey vines twisting up the side of a wall. It gave way under his foot with a soft squish, and recoiled with an odd clicking noise that made Steve flinch and shudder.

"You think they're weird too?" he said to distract himself. "No one else seems bothered by them."

"No one here seems that bothered by anything, pretty boy," Billy said, not looking at him as he pulled a lighter out of his pocket, "or haven't you noticed?"

"Yeah, I guess..." thinking back on it, he hadn't really had much to do with the rest of the town's occupants, and none of them had really reached out to him either. He couldn't remember any of their faces clearly - not the girl behind the bar, or the boy Billy'd been dancing with like twenty minutes ago. They were vague and flat and insubstantial, just... there, like people on a TV screen. Forgettable.

"Not the fastest dog on the track, are ya?" Billy said around a cigarette as he lit up

"Hey, fuck you!" Steve said, flinging out an arm to smack him lightly on the shoulder. But he was smiling, and so was Billy. "This whole town seems a little off to me. Like I'm forgetting something, y'know? I'm not even sure how I got here."

"Me neither," Billy said, blew out a stream of smoke. It didn't smell of anything. The end glowed red.

Am I dreaming, or is that you Harrington? The voice in his head sounded like Billy, the mouth saying it parted to take another drag from a cigarette, strolled closer, radiating a fierce, dangerous crackle of energy, and Steve felt himself tense bracing for whatever came next, because it sure as shit wouldn't be something good.

"Although, that's how I feel most weekends, so."

"Shit," said Steve, the hazy image melting away completely, his head aching, before he could make anything else of it, "you're no help at all, you know that?"

"It's been said."

"Yeah well, I'm saying it again. Oh." Steve stopped short when he realised they'd walked far enough to be out of the town altogether, and were standing at the edge of a beach, sand pale and grey in the

night, waves rolling and breaking hard on the shore. He'd never seen the ocean so close before. Not that he could remember, anyway. He was about to say so to Billy, but when he turned to face him, he was gone. He'd moved a short way along the beach, and was fiddling with the window of one of the beach huts dotted along the edge of the sand.

"Is this yours?" said Steve when he went over to peer through the glass.

"Yeah Einstein, that's why I'm breaking in through the window."

"Jesus," Steve flapped around ineffectively, looking quickly up and down the sand, half expecting someone to appear and start shouting, "what if whoever owns it comes back?"

"I don't think so," Billy said, cigarette clamped between his teeth as he finally jimmied the window open. Somehow, Steve thought he was probably right.

Inside was nondescript; whitewashed wood walls and furniture old but good enough, no pictures of the walls or ornaments on the shelves. A single room containing an odd mix of bedroom and kitchen, and a small bathroom out back. The air inside was cool and close, very still, the only sounds were Billy stalking about and rummaging through the contents of the house, and the water rolling up the shore.

"I've never seen the ocean up close before," Steve said as he stood by the window. It was getting too dark to see properly now, but he looked out towards the shoreline anyway.

"I grew up by the water," Billy said, loose and flippant, like he wasn't really thinking about it, "with my mom..." then he faltered and grew more hesitant. Steve turned to look at him. He'd paused in his digging through the cupboards, frowning and confused, looking as though he couldn't quite remember what he was talking about. Boy, could Steve relate to that. He was obviously troubled by it, but when he noticed Steve watching him he flipped back to a too-bright smile and sauntered over.

"Hey," he looped his arms loosely around Steve, hands at the small of his back. And Steve knew a distraction when he saw one, but that didn't stop him from letting Billy kiss him all the same.

Their noses touched before their lips, soft and unexpected, and Steve's breath caught. Billy felt more real than anything else he could remember, mouth hot and a rasp of stubble on his chin. Steve froze up again, stock still as Billy sucked on his lower lip, before he woke the fuck up and kissed him back. Billy rumbled happily in the back of his throat and tightened his grip on him. Not willing to let him gain the upper hand so easily, Steve turned the tables, grabbed Billy by the front of his jacket and walked them backwards, keeping him occupied with quick, soft kisses, until the backs of Billy's knees hit the bed and they fell, Steve landing on top of him with a huff.

"Wipe that dumb grin off your face," Billy said, but he was grinning too, and Steve just smiled wider before Billy hauled him down for another kiss. They went in too quick and their teeth clacked together.

"I can't."

Steve had always been a do what feels right at the time and worry about it later kind of guy, and this scenario was no different. Billy was of a similar mind, neither stopping to think too hard on it, just following through with whatever felt good. The both of them stripped off, swearing and laughing, accidental elbows in faces and jeans flung across the room, still both grinning like madmen between kisses. Then Billy was on him again, smirking and saying he was going to make it real special for him. He took Steve's dick into his mouth, and Steve saw fucking *stars*. He couldn't help but reach down to tug at Billy's soft mess of hair, murmuring all kinds of nonsense as Billy's tongue dragged over him, one hand pinning his hip and the other sneaking under to knead at his ass.

Then it was over, and Steve felt fucking boneless and absolutely fantastic. Billy clambered up to give him a kiss, sharp tasting but gentle, and Steve felt his still hard dick against his thigh. And alright, he didn't have a lot of experience to draw on, but he felt compelled to rush headlong into it all the same, eagerly putting his hands on Billy like he'd want them on himself, knowing that when Billy hissed sharp between his teeth and jerked under his touch that he was on the right track. He said Steve's name when he finished, a perfect, breathless

gasped that Steve hoped he'd never forget.

"And you never fucked around with a guy before?" Billy said, on his back and still twisted up in the sheets, another cigarette between his lips.

"I already said I haven't, jeez." Steve rolled his shoulder until it popped, aching where he'd been lying on it at a weird angle.

"In that case, I'm honoured to be your first dick."

Steve snorted. "Please shut up."

"You have fucked a chick before though, right?"

"Yeah..." he winced against the sudden dull throbbing of his head, along with the memory of soft brown hair and a slight body underneath him, skin that smelled of roses. "Yeah, I think so."

"Well, that's something," Billy reached blindly over to pat Steve's arm in commiseration.

"Mm. So..." Steve hesitated, chewed on his lip, "when did you know you liked guys?"

He felt Billy tense. "Really? You're asking that *now*? What is this, show and tell?"

"I'm serious," Steve lifted himself up onto one elbow to look down at him. Billy gave a funny sort of jerky shrug against the mattress.

"Always have, always will," he drew on his cigarette, let the smoke drift from his lips. "What more do you want me to say?"

"Wow you're a real closed book, you know that?" Steve waved away the smoke.

"We're having fun pretty boy, there doesn't have to be an answer for everything."

"I know that, but - " he sighed, decided that for now, Billy's answer was probably enough. "Kiss me again."

"God, you're such a loser," Billy grumbled, but he smiled, and stretched up to do it anyway.

Steve blacked out before he could feel it.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick update, this chapter's a little shorter because it was a good place to break. Thanks for comments and kudos so far :)

Slight warning here for some lab stuff - people being held against their will and having drugs administered without consent and the like. Also nosebleeds. Not so different from canon really, but still.

**Running, running,
As fast as we can
Do you think we'll make it?
We're running,
Keep holding my hand
It's so we don't get separated.**

#

Steve woke, eyes heavy and body stiff with the soreness that came from having stayed still too long. His mouth was dry; that horrible, sticky, cotton ball feeling, and he was cold, really fucking cold. He blinked away the ache in his eyes, room around him slowly coming into focus. It was dimly lit, filled with hulking machines he couldn't quite make out, each emitting dull beeps and covered in dials and little flashing lights, those same voices he'd heard before talking low in the next room. There was a sharp, chemical tang that got in the back of his throat and made it scratchy. *The lab*. It was the lab, it had to be. The last he remembered they'd been fighting off demobugs in the woods and now he was in the *lab* and this was exactly the sort of thing Hopper had warned him about when he'd started taking himself off to look for trouble and - shit. *Hargrove*. Disorientated, he turned to look wildly about the room for him, vision still blurred and off centre, blinking hard in a useless attempt to try and clear his head.

"Shit."

Hargrove was across the room in a hospital bed, apparently out cold and hooked up to all kinds of crap, drips in his arms and wires connected to his temples.

"Shit," he tried to sit up, neck too weak to hold up his head, limbs not doing what he wanted them too. It was like the worst kind of hangover; nausea and a headache and a cold sweat all spiced up with a little delirium. "Hargrove," he said, voice cracking and throat feeling like he'd swallowed a wire sponge, panic rising when he realised just how bad a state he was in. What the hell had they done? "Billy!"

He heard a commotion in the next room as whoever it was keeping them there realised he was awake. But he ignored it, because Hargrove was still lying there, motionless and face blank, and yeah they weren't friends exactly but he couldn't fucking leave him in this shit hole at the mercy of those bastards. "Billy!" How had they found them? How long had they been there? He couldn't remember anything after - *fuck*. His head was pounding. He tried to lift his arm, only to feel a tug as whatever he was hooked up to pulled taught and pinched his skin. But he didn't stop, he had to get out, they had to get out -

"Billy! BILLY!" He was shouting, his throat on fire, raw and tight, and he couldn't breathe.

"Shit, hold him down, hold him down!"

"Get the fuck off me," Steve fought against the hands clamping down on his arms, but without much luck. His body felt weak and out of his control and as good as useless, but his head was wide awake, screaming the same two things over and over - *get out*, and *Billy*.

"Give him another dose, quick. Quick!"

"Billy!"

There was the stab of a needle in his arm, and he was asleep again.

#

Billy wasn't in the bar that night. Steve had waited for as long as he

could stick it, leg twitching impatiently where he sat on a bar stool and fingers tapping absently on top of the counter, before he couldn't bear it any longer and left. There had to be other places to go get a drink in town, right? And he didn't know Billy all that well, but he knew enough to guess he'd be in one of them. He shoved his way past the faceless people on the dance floor and out into the street. He didn't even know where to start looking, felt too mixed up to think much on it, just picked a direction and went.

Dumb, so fucking dumb. Of course Billy didn't want to see him again. He'd gotten his rocks off, probably gotten a kick out of being the first guy Steve had fooled around with, and that was that. He knew it made more sense to just let it go. But he'd seemed so... fuck, real? Like it was more than just luck he'd found him. God, that sounded sappy and stupid even to him, he could just picture Billy wincing at that. While Steve was mad about the fact that he was obviously avoiding him, he still couldn't shake the worry creeping cold up his spine, making him tense and fidgety, pausing to look over his shoulder every time he turned a corner. Maybe something had happened to him. He knew Billy was a big boy, could look after himself just fine and would probably piss himself laughing if he knew how antsy Steve was getting over it, but there it was.

He'd poked his head into a good five or six places; diners, bars and what looked like a strip joint before he found a place that screamed Billy. It was grimy as hell, metal music by a band he didn't know screeching in his ears and making his head throb, dark and smoky and filled with people dancing hard and close, all leather and plaid and ripped denim, with sticky surfaces Steve didn't really want to get too close to.

And there he was, drenched in sweat and jumping about madly with the crowd, half-dressed and drunk off his ass and still fiercely beautiful. Steve felt something in him unwind with the relief at having found him, worse for wear but unharmed, not a hundred percent sure on whether he wanted to kiss him or punch him in the jaw. Billy span around and came face to face to with him, slack with surprise for a fraction of a moment, before he pulled back into a hard sneer, chin tilted up and teeth bared. He barged his way through the crowd to stand in front of him, chest heaving and hair stuck to his face with sweat.

"Leave me the fuck alone, pretty boy." His nose was bleeding. Steve fought the urge to wipe it clean.

"Oh, right," he folded his arms across his chest to stop them doing anything stupid. Still wasn't sure where he stood on the whole kiss or punch thing. "Changed your mind have you?"

"It's all just fun and games Stevie boy," he reached out to place the tips of his fingers on Steve's chest, hot through his shirt, to push him back a step, "you hear me buddy? It means nothin'."

"The fuck is wrong with you?" Steve said, hurt and pissed off that after everything, he was still being such a jerk. If it was all 'just fun,' then surely Steve could at least talk to him without being yelled at. He should have seen it coming. "Don't you fucking feel anything, asshole?"

He curled his lip, made to turn away. "I try not to."

Oh no, Steve was not letting it go that easy. He grabbed him by the shoulder and span him back around, Billy blinking at him in disbelief that he'd dared to yank at him like that. "Why won't you just fucking talk to me a minute," he yelled over the music. The song had changed, but he still had no damn idea who it was. "Look, I'm not saying we have to - I don't know, date or whatever, but you can't just fuck off and pretend I don't exist because it doesn't suit you."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Billy got right up in his face, practically spitting with anger, "we can't do this, okay?"

"Oh yeah, why's that?" Steve stood his ground, put his hands on his hips and got in his face right back. "You're the one who wanted this in the first place. You followed me outside, you wanted to talk to me. So guess what? You're gunna talk to me!"

"But we can't! God, Steve I - " Billy's hard expression fell away for a moment, softening into confusion. "I don't remember."

"Yeah, I can't remember anything before this either, doesn't that fucking scare you?" He was still shouting, slightly hysterical now and louder than ever, and no one even spared them a glance.

Billy's sharp smile flickered back for a moment, weak between his pained breaths. "Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe there's a good fucking reason we - " The smile was gone altogether as he gasped in pain and almost doubled over, clutching at his head.

"Billy? Shit," Steve ducked down, anger gone in an instant as he anxiously watched Billy screw his eyes shut against the pain. "Are you - "

"I have to go pick her up," Billy straightened up, breathing hard, and looking the closest to scared Steve had ever seen him, "or my dad'll - " He cut himself off again with another wince and a groan, hand pressed to his forehead. "My fucking head..."

"Billy, it's - "

"Leave me the fuck alone," he gave Steve a hard shove in the chest that made him stagger backwards - *plant your feet* - before he darted off into the crowd, lost between the thrashing bodies.

Steve was winded, and by the time he looked up Billy was no where in sight. He felt something warm drip on his arm, and tentatively raised a hand to his nose. It was bleeding. Which made absolutely no fucking sense, Billy hadn't even touched his face. He chose to ignore it in favour of finding Billy, wiped away the blood with the back of his hand and lurched into the crowd after him. But he couldn't seem to get through - there were too many people, all pale and faceless, the floor uneven and slippery with those damn vines. They squelched under his feet and curled around his ankles, pulling him down. The air was thick and cold and stale, he choked on it, hand going to his throat to pull away something that wasn't there, blood still streaming from his nose and dripping into his mouth. Everything went black.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry. The next chapter's nicer, promise.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter's a bit soppy, and also got a little bloodier than I was expecting. Wow, what a combo.

**Be
Be the one I need,
Be the one I trust most
Don't stop inspiring me.
Sometimes it's hard to keep on running
We work so much to keep it going,
Don't make me want to give up.**

#

Steve was on top of a building. Three stories up. It was dark, as it always seemed to be in that goddamn town, streets below him coming to life for the night, signs blinking on and kids laughing and shouting over the music blaring from their cars. But it was all just background noise, indistinct and unimportant, and for now he was glad he wasn't a part of it. He could see the vines from up there too; not really noticeable unless you were looking for them, filling the dark corners and creeping along the cracks, just slightly paler than the shadows they hid in. They made him shiver, so he looked away. In doing so, his eye caught on a figure watching him from the ground, orange tip of a cigarette lifting to his mouth. Steve stilled, watched in silence as Billy walked around the edge of the building, heard his boots clang on the metal stairs of the fire escape, heard the grit on the rooftop crunch as he approached behind him.

"Hey," he said, eyes still on the giddy town below them, loud after the silence he'd wrapped around himself.

"Hey," Billy said from just behind him, voice a little rough and scratchy, tired. "Mind if I - "

Steve waved a hand at the empty space next to him on the concrete. "Sure. Knock yourself out."

He heard Billy sniff before coming around to sit next to him. Steve hadn't really noticed the absence of feeling, neither hot nor cold, nothing at all, until Billy's leg rested next to his, and he felt the heat coming off him. "Thanks."

They sat in silence a while, Steve feeling... not ill exactly, but a bit off; his mouth tasted sour and a headache was creeping in around the edges of his skull. And honestly, he wasn't sure what he wanted to say to Billy after last time, wasn't sure what he wanted to hear. He wasn't even a hundred percent on what had actually happened. He was having trouble lately figuring out what were memories and what were imaginings, and the whole thing was made blurry and wavering like everything in this place seemed to be after it had happened, sharp in the moment but insubstantial after, and broken up the pounding of his head. Besides, it was obvious Billy was psyching himself up to speak, hands balled into fists in his lap and shoulders rolled in on himself, taking a deep breath several times over as if to speak, but couldn't quite push out the words. Steve waited.

"I'm sorry."

Steve felt himself unclench a little, unaware he'd been doing so until it eased. "Alright."

"I got here, and I saw you. I thought hey great, let's have a little fun, see if I can get this pretty boy to smile. If he'll flirt back, if I can get him to kiss me..." Billy's fragile smile flickered away as he looked back down at his hands. "I wasn't prepared to - to like you so fucking much, dipshit."

"Asshole," Steve said, and laughed weakly, rubbing a hand over his face. "Me neither, I guess."

"Look, I don't do this," Billy said, suddenly more animated as he twisted to face him, voice firmer and jaw tight. And Steve wondered briefly how he could be so sure of himself - Steve knew who he was *right now*, but anything before this place was difficult to grasp and keep hold of, he didn't know his own bad habits or the details of his dating history. Maybe Billy was bluffing - Steve knew enough about him to guess he didn't feel great about letting any perceived weakness slip through the cracks. Which made what he was saying

that bit more momentous. "I don't stick around, it's too dangerous."

"How can you know that?"

"I don't know, I - I can't say, just please believe me? Nothing good ever lasts with me, okay, I'm bad news Stevie boy, I know it - "

Steve leaned over, cutting off his words with a kiss. Just a light press of his lips, enough that Billy could've brushed him aside if he wanted. It felt to him that showing Billy he was there for him, that he needed him too in this strange set of circumstances they were in, would work better than trying to find the words. He didn't think he could find them even if he tried. Billy was still, and he was about to pull away and give him space when Billy's agitation vanished, he whined low in his throat and his body melted into Steve's side.

#

They were at the beach. He didn't remember moving, didn't remember leaving the rooftop in the middle of town, but there they were by the ocean again, sitting outside the beach house. It was different to last time though; now choked with vines, spilling from the window and hanging limp from the roof, sickly yellow buds sitting among the green-grey mass. Billy was close, an arm draped around Steve's shoulder, his hair in Steve's face with the wind blowing in off the sea. Funny though, how the air still felt close and still, and thick in his throat, when it should have been cold and clear. He shuffled in closer to Billy, who gave a little jump, as if he'd forgotten Steve was there, before his fingers tightened on his shoulder.

"Hey Sleeping Beauty," Billy said around a cigarette, "was wonderin' when you'd join me."

"Mm. You didn't think to try a kiss?"

"Didn't work." He fell quiet, frowning at the lit cigarette in his hand. Steve pulled back to get a better look at him.

"What's up?"

"Doesn't taste of anything," Billy said, though he continued to smoke

it as they talked, unwilling to waste a cigarette, even if it was a bad one, "must be a shitty brand."

"So," said Steve, still trying to get over the disorientation of no longer being on the rooftop, "what you said back there."

"Yep."

"I hope you figured out that I think that's total crap, and there's no getting rid of me now, whether you like it or not?"

"Yep."

"Good," Steve said, turning his face into Billy's shoulder, although they both knew it wouldn't be nearly so simple as that. "I'm glad I met you, y'know. So fucking glad." The thought of this place, alone, wasn't one Steve wanted to dwell on.

"Yeah. Yeah, me too pretty boy," he turned to face Steve, eyes bright in the gloom and sickly moonlight glinting off his teeth as he grinned, "we can do this." The hand that wasn't on Steve's shoulder crept down to tug at Steve's clammy fingers, opened them up to twine them with his. Billy's palm was hot. "We can do this."

"I didn't say anything before," Steve began after a short silence, flexing his fingers, getting used to the weight of Billy's between them, "because it makes me sound fucking crazy. But I figured..."

"Now or never, right?"

"Yeah," Steve said, took another breath to keep his head together. "I feel like I might have met you before."

"Yeah?" He could hear the smirk in Billy's voice. "How 'bout in your dreams?"

Steve snorted and elbowed Billy in the ribs as best he could with them sitting all jammed up together. "Fuck you. No, I just... I get these flashes of you, sometimes," he thought again of that fragmented image of Billy, bloody-faced and yelling, gleefully angry, "but they can't be real, right?" He couldn't reconcile the Billy he was sitting next to at that moment, holding him close and breathing soft in his

hair, with the one he'd seen in his head. His Billy was volatile, sure, a little short-tempered and kind of a dick, but not *that*. He waited a moment, but Billy didn't say anything, and Steve began to worry he'd said too much. "Like I said, crazy."

"No," Billy said, detached and hesitant, fingers twitching and tightening in Steve's, "I wasn't going to tell you either, because I was trying so hard not to care," he snorted, self-deprecating. "But yeah, me too."

"Really? You think you've seen me before?" he said, unable to check the hope in his voice. "In my dreams, right?" he added dryly as an afterthought.

"You wish, baby." Steve couldn't see his face properly from the angle he was sitting at, but he'd bet pretty much anything Billy was throwing some obscene gesture his way. "Nah, I remember seeing you getting out of a car. And thinking you were sexy as hell."

"Aw, you're just saying that to get in my pants," he reached blindly over to pat Billy's thigh.

"That sound like something I would do?"

"Yes," said Steve flatly.

"Alright, maybe it was a little to get in your pants," Billy said. "But I really do think I remember seeing you. It was a fucking lame car."

Steve hummed, and looked out to the water. He still felt messed up and turned around and all kinds of wrong, but knowing that Billy did too... it helped. They could be fuck ups together. "Do you - " He broke off when he saw the blood on Billy's upper lip. "Your nose is bleeding again."

"Aw, shit," Billy poked at his nose, studied the blood on his fingertips as if he couldn't quite figure out where it had come from.

"Lemme get that." Steve did what he'd wanted to do before, and dabbed at it carefully with his sleeve until it was all but gone, Billy watching him with soft amusement.

"Thanks."

Before he could reply, a noise from behind the house distracted him. It was a sort of buzzing, loud and angry, and that odd clicking noise that came from between the vines that made Steve flinch and shudder. "You hear that right?"

Billy paused to listen, smile dropping off his face in a way that could only mean yeah, he heard it too. "The fuck's that?"

"I don't know," said Steve, untangling himself from Billy and standing up on the sand, warily eyeing the vine-covered beach house. Without thinking, he ducked to pick up a knotted length of driftwood, instantly feeling a little more together with the weight of it in his hand. To his side, he saw Billy do the same. Good. *Billy was good in a fight.*

There was a beat of silence, enough for Steve to take one last shaky breath, before the things came at them. They looked like bugs, fucking huge bugs - *demobugs*, his mind supplied and his head started to ache - big and nasty and the same green-grey as the vines, and heading right at them.

"Shit!" he heard Billy shout, followed by a dull thud as he knocked aside one of the bugs with the makeshift weapon.

He shifted into some inexplicable sort of muscle memory after that; swiping at the bugs as best he could with the length of driftwood, wincing when he caught one just right and it burst in a mess of goop over his arm. And Billy was right behind him, yelling with a bit too much enthusiasm for someone faced with a hoard of bloodthirsty demonic bugs, but hey, it was getting the job done. He spared a glance over at him, grinning wildly as he smacked another of the ugly bugs right out of the air, and - *they were in the woods, demobugs flying out at them from the nest, Steve grabbing his bat and Billy the crowbar from the trunk of Steve's car, a pile of dead bugs at their feet, and maybe Hargrove wasn't so bad after all, and then the lab... the lab, they had them, this can't be real -*

"Fuck!"

His head hurt, a stabbing pain that started between his eyes and spread all the way back, throbbing and rendering him as good as useless as the reality of it hit him - he could remember. Hawkins, the kids, El, Nancy, the Upside Down, the lab, Billy fucking Hargrove. Blood was running freely from his nose now too, dripping all over his arm, and it only seemed to make the demobugs more determined to get him. He swatted weakly at them.

"Steve? Steve!"

Billy was calling him, and oh shit look at that, he must have fallen, because there was sand scratching the side of his face and when he opened his eyes everything was sideways. The blurry shape of Hargrove, of Billy, was stumbling towards him across the sand, and Steve smiled to see him, despite the ache in his head. Distracted as he was by getting to Steve, Billy didn't notice one of the demobugs, dazed but unhurt, making right for him. Its fucking messed up, flower-shaped face opened up to latch onto his neck, that infuriating tanned V of bare skin, and knocked him to the ground.

"No!" Steve tried to drag himself over to him, but the sand kept giving way under his fingers, body unresponsive and head too heavy. "Billy! Shit..."

Billy was looking right at him, eyes gone wide and glassy, blood running from his nose and where the demobug was gnawing at him. And then he was gone. Just gone, a grey stretch of empty sand where he'd been seconds before.

Steve didn't have long to panic though, his head still throbbing and feeling like it was going to split in two, everything starting to shake and waver; the sky, the sea, the demobugs and the vine-choked house, the ground underneath him unstable, before it all disappeared into blackness.

Notes for the Chapter:

So. There's that. Tune in next time as the science gets even more dubious.

Anyone who's miraculously still with me here, things should make a little more sense with the next part.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

As promised, the 'science' gets more dubious than ever, kids. A smush of Stranger Things science, San Junipero science, and shit I made up in an attempt to fuse the two things together. K thnx.

Also it's snowing today and my housemate's bitching about how she was not made for this bullshit and misses California and she is giving me Billy feelings.

Steve woke to the sound of his own gasping breath, hot blood from his nose running down his chin and metallic in his throat, and a hand gentle but firm on his arm.

"Billy," he rasped out as soon as he could, throat stinging, rough and sore, unable to catch his breath and head swimming. He had to stop the bleeding, it'd draw more of the demobugs, and he couldn't let him bleed out on the fucking beach, he couldn't, didn't want to let him go that fucking easy. "Billy?"

"He's fine," said a voice Steve knew but couldn't quite place, "Steve he's fine, it's okay. You need to calm down."

"I - what?" The beach was gone, he wasn't lying on sand but a hospital bed, endless black sky and the little beach house replaced with the dull buzzing lights and cold steel of the lab. There were no demobugs trying to rip his face off, only the dull hum of machines and beeping of monitors.

"You're both okay."

Steve blinked to clear his head, the blurriness from his eyes, sucking in deep breaths and feeling like he might throw up, disorientated and confused. He tried to focus on the person who'd spoken, standing to the side, their hand still warm and steady on his upper arm. "Nancy?"

"Thank God," she seemed to wilt a little in relief, thin smile gaining

strength as she took his shaking hand in hers, smaller and damp with sweat. "We were worried you wouldn't snap out of it."

"What?" His voice sounded wrong, weak and slurred and unfamiliar. He coughed, spat out blood that'd dripped from his nose. "Nance, what the fuck is happening?"

"We'll explain, but first we have to get you out," she said, smile giving way to that determined set of her face that he'd seen a hundred times before as she pushed his hair back from his forehead. She wasn't supposed to touch him like that anymore, came a thought half-formed at the back of his mind, but he was grateful for it just then.

"Welcome back, kid," Hopper said gruffly, appearing at his other side and stooping to take hold of his arm, "this is going to hurt, but we're on a bit of a time limit here." The sharp sting of the needle being tugged out of his arm brought Steve back to himself a little more. It made no fucking sense... They were in the lab, but they'd been on the beach just moments ago, the demobugs on them and -

"Where's Billy?" He still couldn't see him, and the last thing he remembered was the blood running freely from his throat as one of those fucking things chewed on his neck. The nausea rose up again, and he fought it back as he tried to pull himself upright. He needed to see him.

"Shh," Nancy put a hand on his chest to keep him still, "he's right over there Steve, it's okay. I promise."

"But - "

"I promise. Come on, let's get you unhooked from all this crap." She started to help Hopper removing the wires and straps holding him down, but Steve barely paid her any mind, thoughts chasing each other around his head and making even less sense the harder he tried to catch a hold of them. When she ducked to untangle a wire, he could see the other hospital bed over his shoulder. And there was Billy, very much alive, and not bleeding out from demobug bites. Though he looked about as rough as Steve felt, drawn and pale, eyes screwed shut as he returned the fierce hug Max was giving him. El was there too, watching them both with a tiny little smile as she

undid the last strap around Billy's ankle.

It was all just... too fucking much. The relief that Billy hadn't been eaten by demobugs, that he was still having trouble sorting what was real from what wasn't, how much he wanted to go and pull Billy into his arms and not let go until he knew for sure he was alright. He remembered all of it; his life in Hawkins that had been pushed from his mind for what felt like days, the grudging truce that he and Billy had fallen into after the night at the Byers', and held ever since. But he also remembered the Billy he'd known the past few days, dancing with him and pushing him away, walking with him on the beach and sleeping next to him in the beach house, shouting at him in the club and kissing him on the rooftop. Too fucking much.

"All set Harrington," Hopper said when Steve was free of wires, pulling him out of his frantic thoughts, "now we've really gotta move."

"Okay," Steve nodded, tried to pull himself together.

"You got him Wheeler?" Hopper said to Nancy, "I think Hargrove might need a hand, if his little sister'll let me near him."

"Yeah, we're good," Nancy said, and hooked an arm under Steve's shoulder to help pull him to his feet. His legs felt like they were made of string. He looked across to the other bed, where Hopper was helping a scowling Billy get to his feet, Max hovering at his side. It wasn't until he was standing too, wobbly and weak and mostly held up by Nancy, that he realised he was wearing a hospital gown. It really should have been the least of his worries, but he felt all mixed up and delirious and his head still ached like a bitch, and for some reason he found it hilarious.

"What's so funny?" Nancy asked when she heard his wheezy giggling.

"Feeling a little draughty," he said, plucked at the thin material over his chest.

"Oh."

"Lucky I've got a great butt, huh?"

"Sure," Nancy said, and he could hear her smile. "And lucky for you half the town already saw it that time you and Tommy streaked at Mandy Simmons' party. So nothing to worry about now, right?"

"Mm."

Steve's laughter fell away though, when they were nearly out of the room and he caught sight of the mess on the counter. It was the mangled body of a demobug, spliced and pinned out for testing and hooked up to stuff in a way disturbingly similar to what Steve had been a minute ago. It was mostly intact after the two of them had killed it in the woods, puncture holes from Steve's bat all along its side. He winced and looked away, but the image of the one that had smashed into Billy, screeched and torn at his neck, wouldn't go away. He twisted around to chance another look at Billy, to reassure himself he was alright, that it hadn't really happened. Billy looked just as disturbed by the sight of the dead demobug as Steve was, but angry rather than disgusted, like he'd like nothing more than to take another swing, kill it all over again. He saw Steve watching him, and looked away. Steve ignored the way that made him feel like he'd been punched in the chest, and spoke to Hopper instead.

"Hey Hop," he called across the room, fighting back another coughing fit from his too dry throat, "that's what was in that thing we found in the woods. It was a nest of those." He jerked his head at the demobug.

"Thought as much," Hopper said with a grunt, "I was on my way to go check it again myself when El finally found you two here. You've been gone four days, kid."

Steve's attention slipped to Billy again to see his reaction, but he was staring stonily at the floor and clearly unimpressed by the fact that he needed Hopper's help to walk. He didn't say anything. Steve hissed when Nancy shifted her grip on him and caught a sore spot from the IV.

"Shit! Sorry, sorry."

They went as fast as they could out of the room they'd been kept in and along the dim corridor, emergency lights stuttering, Steve trying

to go faster but his body not listening. When they reached the door at the end, Jonathan was waiting for them, keeping watch, flanked by two unconscious night guards slumped against the wall. El's handiwork, probably.

"Hey," he said to Steve as the group shuffled their way closer, a flicker of a relieved smile, "you're okay."

"Looks like it," he said, and tried to return the smile.

"Yeah yeah, there's time for all that shit later," Hopper said, hefting Billy closer under his arm, Billy glaring at him, "we're running out of time, come on."

They were lucky - or maybe lucky wasn't the right word, considering it was well within El's abilities to take out the small skeleton crew who worked at the lab overnight - and didn't meet any resistance on their way out. It wasn't until they emerged into the night that Steve realised it wasn't the same lab as before; they were in a part of the woods he didn't recognise at all. But really, he didn't give a fuck as long as he got as far away from the place as he could.

He and Billy were manhandled into the back of Hopper's truck, the chief driving and El with him up front. Max had to get home; she said so to Billy with the kind of heaviness that suggested there was more to it than that. He must have known what she meant, because he nodded sharply, just the once, before he submitted to another hug from her. She pestered him once more about getting better real quick, threw him an 'I'm glad you're okay, asshole' over her shoulder, and got into Jonathan's car.

"Same goes for you," Nancy said, still lingering by the back door of the truck.

"What, the glad I'm okay part, or the asshole part?"

"Both," she smiled, closed the door. "I'll come check up on you tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure."

Hopper started up the truck, kept the lights dim as he drove back out

through the trees. The sun was starting to come up.

"The two of you'll be staying with me and Jane until you're in a fit state to go home to your families," he said, fumbled to get a cigarette lit. "Doesn't look like you're hurt too bad, but there's no prize for guessing you'll need a good sleep and truckload of food before you feel ready for people again."

"Yeah," Steve said, because he felt like he should answer.

"I can put in a call to the school, get things smoothed over for you both there, And I can call your folks too, if you - "

"No," Billy cut across him, "me going missing for a few days... it's happened before. They won't worry."

"Max said the same thing." Hopper met Billy's eye in the rearview mirror for a long moment. "If you say so. Let me know if you change your mind. What about you, Harrington?"

"Um, no," he said. "They're out of town. There's no one there to call."

"Alright."

Fucking sad was what it was, that neither of them were missed by their own parents four days after being kidnapped by a rebel branch of a secret government facility. But the kids had noticed, though. Apparently Max had been worrying about Billy and Dustin had been worrying about Steve when both of them had failed to show up to collect them from the arcade. Both of them had told Lucas, and they'd figured out something wasn't right. It hit him again then how sorry he was they'd all had to deal with this shit so young; he couldn't have done it.

He snuck another look over at Billy. His eyes were closed, but Steve would bet his car he wasn't really sleeping. It said a lot that Billy had agreed to all of the fuss without much of a fight - he must have been feeling just as shitty and helpless as Steve was. Even with all the 'sleep' he'd had over the past few days and the adrenaline from their escape still pumping hard through his veins, Steve was almost asleep by the time they got to the cabin.

It was getting light as Hopper herded them all through the door, him helping Billy and Steve leaning on El. He felt kind of bad about it, her being so small and shit, but he had the feeling she was using her powers a little bit too, because he felt all weird and weightless. But then, that could've just been the past four days with a body pumped full of God knows what drugs.

El helped him to the couch, then ran off to get two ugly ass crochet blankets that she handed to them with a sort of reverence that made him wonder if they belonged to her. Billy looked like he wanted to refuse, but took it after El stared him down for a long moment. She sat down next to Steve on the couch, looking with curiosity between him and Billy, seated stiffly across the room in a moth-eaten armchair. He wondered how much she'd been looking into his head, what she was seeing right now and if she could see the past few days too, but he mostly was too tired to give a shit. But more than that, he was thinking how much he knew that Billy - because yeah his Billy from the drug-induced dreams or whatever they'd been and the one right in front of him were undoubtedly the same Billys, just as he was still the same Steve - must have desperately wanted a hug, but he was just as certain Billy wouldn't permit him to give him one.

Fuck, it was a mess. he wouldn't even look at him.

Honestly, he just wanted to go to sleep and pretend like none of it was happening, but there were some questions he knew he needed the answers to before he could even consider it. "Hop? What the fuck happened?"

"Buckle up boys," Hopper said as he came over from the kitchen, handing them each a coffee loaded up with about ten sugars, "because this is fucked up, even for them."

"Who's them? said Billy, voice lower and rougher than usual, probably felt just as crappy as Steve's did.

Shit. What with everything happening the way it did, it had sorta slipped Steve's mind that Billy didn't *know*. Which must have made it all a hundred times worse; at least he'd had some sort of context. "Um," he had to try and explain some of it, he owed him that. And the bastards had broken their own confidentiality contracts when they'd kidnapped Billy and dragged him into it for fuck's sake, so they

could suck it. "The bugs we were fighting in the woods, when the lab guys found us, you remember?" Billy nodded, attention focused somewhere to the left of Steve's head. "Right so... it's happened before, or close enough. It was what was happening that night at the Byers'. And this is why we couldn't tell you at the time. The lab - they're kinda the bad guys."

"So," Billy began, frowning into his coffee, still not looking at Steve, "there's monsters, and guys who're pissed because you know about the monsters?"

"Bad men," said El, not looking up from her own mug of cocoa, "safer not to know."

Billy stared at her a long while before he nodded tightly, lips pressed thin together and not meeting anyone's eye, glaring at the floor instead. "Why did they take us?"

"So first off. You might've noticed," Hopper looked to Steve, "that that was not the old DoE lab from before. Nah, people are still watching that place, they really have abandoned it, for better or worse. This was a few miles west and on a smaller scale, underground."

"Wait, literally underground?" Steve said, and Hopper nodded. "Shit."

"Yeah. We're guessing they've been keeping an eye on shit, sorta like we do, and they found the nest in the woods just like we did. Only you were unlucky enough to be there when they sent someone in to get a closer look."

"Why'd they takes us, Hop? Steve repeated Billy's question.

Hopper sighed, pushed a hand through his hair. "Wrong place, wrong time, kiddo. They had to make sure you kept quiet about that nest, and my guess is they were looking for someone to test it all on, and you boys being there... well, it was a case of two birds, one stone for them"

"Test what?" Billy said, tense and quiet.

"Okay, first off, you should know this is all pretty rough. Pieced together from what El's been able to see, some paperwork we found

when we were busting you out, and intel from an old contact."

"Owens? said Steve.

Hopper nodded. "It looks like they were working on a way to send their guys into the Upside Down to kill shit without having to send their actual, physical bodies in. They're on reduced numbers now, thanks to what happened last year, and I'm guessing they don't want to risk losing any more than they have to. From what Owens said, there were plans to send a test subject's consciousness someplace else while their real body was put under and kept safe in the lab. The end goal being to fine tune it enough to send them to the Upside Down.

"Upside Down?" Billy said.

"The uh, the place all the bad shit comes from," said Steve.

"Right."

"And the theory was," Hopper continued, "that since they'd just be sending their minds, most likely in a sort of simulated body, if they got hurt in the Upside Down, they'd just zap 'em back to their real bodies, safe and sound. It seems like the two of you were the lucky winners. The test subjects."

There was a heavy silence while Hopper looked between the two of them like he was waiting for some kind of big reaction.

"It worked," said Steve, when it became obvious Billy wasn't going to say anything. "I don't know where they sent us. It looked like just any old town, but like the Upside Down was slowly swallowing it up. There were kids and cars and diners and - " a beach, and a house with a big white bed - "but the vines were there too. Even there, I knew they weren't right, Hop. And then they sent in demobugs. They - I guess they must have been ready to test whether or not getting hurt in the simulation hurt our real bodies."

"Shit. Were you hurt?"

Steve glanced at Billy again, knew he wouldn't thank him for sharing the details. "Yeah. But we're okay now. I mean, there's the nosebleeds, but," he shrugged. "I feel like shit, I won't lie about that.

But I'm okay."

"So it actually worked?"

"Sort of."

"Shit. Then that's why it took us so long to get you out," Hopper said grimly. "Your consciousnesses weren't in the same place as your bodies - El couldn't get a proper reading on you for days."

"Yeah, they hadn't got it right though," Steve said, voice cracking. That annoyed him more than it should have.

"What?"

"I -" he kept his eyes on Billy. "I couldn't remember much from here when I was in there. I knew my name, had flashes of memory" - *Billy above him in the Byers' house, yelling and screaming as he hit him* - "but I was pretty much a blank slate in there."

"Holy crap. You actually remember what happened to you in there?"

"Yeah. But it wasn't -" Billy was still staring at the floor, Steve looked away - "it wasn't all bad."

"Who fucking cares?" Billy suddenly spat, setting his coffee mug down hard on the table.

"What?" Steve said.

"It's over now, right? So what does it fucking matter? It's done," he threw the blanket off his shoulders, ignoring the pissy look El gave him for it, and stomped off. "I gotta take a leak."

A part of Steve wanted to follow him, the part of him that had started to get used to the thought of reaching out to him, the part that had gotten used to the weight of him pressed along his side, the idea of their fingers twisted together as they swapped kisses. But another part knew better, and left him alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

I... really hope that made sense.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter and the next are little because they were one, but they felt weird right next to each other so I split them.

I can't remember the layout of Hopper's cabin and I'm not going to look it up.

Little heads up just in case - mentions of Steve having nightmares/visions. I didn't want to tag it because honestly I think most of us assume he does by this point anyway, and it's not all that important to the plot. But still.

The lock on the bathroom door in Hopper and El's cabin was busted. Which was weird, considering every other room had one in perfect working order, and lockable doors were something Hopper was understandably diligent about when it came to El. After Hopper had caught them up on what had happened at the lab and Billy had stormed off like Steve should have known he would, he still wanted nothing more than to forget it all and go to sleep. *Good luck there, buddy.* But his skin felt like it was crawling, still held the clinical tang of chemicals and pretty much just smelt like a body that hadn't been washed for four days. And though it wasn't physically there, he felt like there was dirt from the woods grained into his skin, vines creeping up his arms, blood on his face and sand caught in his hair. Yeah, no way could he do anything else before he got himself cleaned up a bit. He'd knocked on the door first; after all, Billy had claimed he needed the bathroom when he'd made his loud exit from the conversation, but no one answered, and Steve let himself in. The shower was a little old and a lot temperamental and never quite got hot enough, but when Steve was done, skin scrubbed and smelling of nothing more offensive than soap, he felt a bit more like he might be okay.

Back in the living room, he sprawled out on the sofa to watch TV with El. Hopper had had to go to work. Everything ached, his head most of all, but if he just laid still and tried not to think too hard on it

- any of it - it wasn't unbearable. He had no idea what it was they were watching, and it didn't help that she changed the channel with a blink each time she decided she'd had enough of whatever happened to be on. But it was sort of soothing; she didn't have the volume up too loud, and the murmuring of a hoard of soap opera characters was a nice distraction from the mess in his head.

"How do you pick what to watch?" he asked, after she'd just changed it again.

El looked sheepish for a second, and switched the channel back to the one it had been on moments before. "Sorry. Jim said I should ask before I change it, if I'm watching with someone else."

"No," he said, feeling bad for making her feel bad, "no, I wasn't really watching. I just think it's kinda neat you can do that. I didn't know." He never really spared it a thought, but it made sense she could do more than just close up inter-dimensional gateways and throw bad guys around.

She gave him a tiny smile out of the side of her mouth, which, though he'd only met her a handful of times over the past few months at game night or whatever with the rest of the kids, he'd started to realise didn't happen all that much. She was quick to feel, but slow to show it sometimes, he guessed. He wished Billy was a little slower to show it, then they might actually have been able to finish talking things through earlier like actual people did. But no, he wasn't thinking about Billy. "If I like their voice, I keep it."

He nodded, gave her a weak smile back. "Makes sense."

It wasn't until about twenty minutes later, heat from the shower long since dissipated, that Steve realised how cold it was in the cabin, cool air making his arms prickle and his body want to curl in on itself. He'd left the old sweater Hopper had loaned him in the bathroom when he'd showered. After a brief internal battle over whether it was worth it, he pulled himself back up off the sofa. He pushed open the bathroom door without a second thought, coming to an abrupt stop when he realised Billy was in there.

He hadn't gotten into the shower yet. The hospital gown was gone,

and he had a towel around his waist, was looking at himself in the small, cracked mirror above the sink. His hair was a mess and not in its usual intentional way, skin pale and dull, lifeless in a way that made Steve recoil with the memory of watching a demobug bite down on his shoulder, of Billy bleeding out on the sand. But the bite marks from the demobug in the fake Upside Down weren't there. Instead there were the livid purple bruises on his arms from the IV and whatever other shit the lab had had them hooked up to, skin on his temples raw where wires had been taped. And Steve knew those marks, had the very same ones covering his body, but to see them reflected on Billy made him ache.

He'd seen Billy half-dressed or with nothing on at all a bunch of times, in gym and the showers, parties or in town with his shirt barely buttoned, and thought nothing of it. But now, he couldn't help but think of the kisses he'd left on his chest, each dip and curve of Billy's body under his hands, the warmth of him next to the nothing of that place they'd been stuck in. He hadn't been ready for the intensity of feeling it brought him, which was probably why, when Billy finally realised he was there and turned to look at him, he blurted out -

"Do you remember?" If Steve did, there was no reason why he shouldn't.

Billy looked away almost immediately, filling the sink with water to shave. The hair on his face actually grew noticeably after a few days, unlike Steve's. "Remember what?" he said gruffly, eyes on the water.

"I - " Steve was at a loss for words for a moment, head still split between two places and more than two times, and fucking exhausted. He also hadn't been expecting his question to be met with another question thrown right back at him. "What happened while we were in there. Do you remember it?" *Please just say you remember.*

"There's nothing to remember, pretty boy," Billy said, still not looking at him, reaching for the shaving foam, "we were unconscious, right?"

"Fucking - " why did he have to be so fucking difficult? Turned out four days being held captive and unconscious in a glorified basement by the government couldn't change some things. "Fine, what do you remember?"

"Are you deaf?" Billy said. "They fuck with your ears while you were in there? I said there's nothing to remember, dipshit. Black, fuzzy - y'know? *Nothing.*"

"C'mon Billy," he said, too tired and just plain fucking over it all to really register his slip up with his name, desperate for Billy to just tell him he remembered it too, all of it, that he wasn't alone in this mess, "you gotta remember something, man."

"Look, all I know is," Billy began, with the deliberate care of a person speaking to someone they considered especially slow, still not looking at him and prodding at the razor blade to test its sharpness, "we were beating on those fuckin' bug things in the woods, then nothing. What more do you want me to say, Harrington?"

He remembered the way Billy had mouthed at his neck, panted out Steve, *Steve*, as he arched underneath him. Now it was back to Harrington, and yeah, there was a whole lot more he wanted Billy to say - that he remembered, that he wanted to pull Steve into his arms just as much as he wanted to haul Billy into his, that he'd meant every damn word they'd said to each other in that haunting, maddening place. But this was Billy fucking Hargrove, and really, what had he expected? "Okay," he said, defeated and not ready to regroup and try again just yet, pushed his still damp hair off his face, "fine. That's fine. Sorry for... interrupting, or whatever." He looked away before Billy did, left without picking up the sweater. El wouldn't mind if he borrowed her blanket a little longer.

#

When he woke up it was almost dark again, and his neck hurt from the awkward angle he'd slept at on the sofa. Letting out a long breath, he rubbed at his eyes, tried to take stock of the various pains and sore spots over his body, even worse now than before. It was easier than examining what was happening in his head. Before he'd really even woken up properly, El said -

"Billy's gone home."

He flinched, and blinked away the flutter of panic as he turned his head to look at her. He'd forgotten where he was. "What?"

"He went home," El was still sitting in Hopper's chair, book open on her lap and not looking up from the pages, the TV still on but the volume turned down lower, "I don't think he wanted me to tell you. But he didn't tell me not to tell you."

"Right," Steve said, everything aching and still exhausted despite having slept the whole day away. But then he guessed that wasn't too surprising, considering. His mouth was dry and tasted fucking gross, and he felt like he could sleep for another hundred years. He should be so lucky. "Right. Yeah, I should uh, probably get going too."

"Jim said you should stay until you feel better," El said, frowning at her book.

"I do feel better," Steve lied, "a little. I just want to get back to normal, y'know?" His parents weren't due back for another week at least, so he'd have time to try and sort the past few days through in his head before they'd be there to pester him. They set his teeth on edge these days, in ways they never used to. And yeah, he felt safer in the cabin than he knew he would at home, with El there and Hopper easy to get hold of, but he also felt watched, scrutinised, and that was the last thing he wanted to feel right now.

El looked at him, long and hard like she was weighing him up, before she shrugged and went back to her book. "Everyone has their own ways to feel better."

"Yeah," he said, sitting up and pushing the crochet blanket off, arms and legs tingling and head heavy. He caught sight of the dark purple bruise from the IV on his forearm, twisted it around so he wouldn't have to look at it. "I guess you're right. Tell Hop to call me if there's anything else he needs to know, okay?"

"Okay."

"Thanks El," he managed a sort of smile, nodded the the blanket, "for helping us out. Again."

She smiled back, small and fluttery, like a bird. "It's okay. Friends."

"Yeah," he said, thankful for her smile, that it kept the weight of

everything at bay for a little while longer. "Friends."

Someone had driven his car back from where he'd left it in the woods - either Hopper or Jonathan, he'd have to thank them for it later - and it was waiting for him outside the cabin. It was dark outside now, and still, and the fears he'd been having ever since last November, that he'd been getting better at keeping at bay, began to creep back in. He focused on his car, on opening the door, starting the engine, reversing out, driving away, tried not to think too hard on the new twist to the complete fucking mess he was in until he was alone and could freak out in peace.

To his dim surprise, it actually worked, and it wasn't until he'd gotten home and crawled into his own cold bed that he started to properly fall apart.

It was something that had been happening on and off ever since last November, when he'd gone down into the tunnels with the kids. Even before then, he'd had the odd indistinct nightmare about the man with the fucked up flower-petal face, chasing him through endless flashing Christmas lights. There were good days and bad days; a week or more might pass with no incident at all, followed by two or three nights where he couldn't close his eyes without seeing demodogs rushing up at him in the dark. So yeah, he wasn't all that surprised that he wasn't faring too well given the past few days he'd had.

But this time, there were a couple of new things thrown into the mix. Along with the somewhat standard demodogs lurking in the dark corners of his room, clicking and hissing, there was the buzz of demobugs in his ears, those fucking Christmas lights flashing each time he blinked, a phantom memory of a throbbing ache in his head and blood in the back of his throat, and dripping down dark and thick from Billy's neck as the demobug latched on -

He threw out his arm to turn on the light, knocking a pile of junk to the floor in the process. The clatter of it made him flinch, but the light helped keep the rest of it at bay, helped chase the demobugs from the shadows. He should have left it on to start with, stupid, *stupid*. Thank fuck he'd been exhausted enough that he'd been able to get some sleep in at Hopper's, because he sure as hell wouldn't be getting any more for a while. He resigned himself to another shitty night, pushed the sheets away from his sweat-drenched body, and

stared up at his bedroom ceiling.

So. Billy. That bit was new, glaringly so. He should have expected it really, given how much time he'd spent with him - sort of - over the past four days, all that had happened between them, and how he was carefully not thinking about it since they'd woken up, since Billy'd told him he remembered nothing. How it was that, not the kidnapping by a government agency, not the demobugs, not the being pumped full of drugs and kept unconscious for four days, but the revelation that he felt some kind of way about Billy fucking Hargrove that wasn't anger or irritation, was the thing at the forefront of his mind?

So he gave in, and let himself think about. He couldn't make it fit. The Billy who'd needled him constantly and almost beat him to death in the Byers' front room, the Billy that'd taken the crowbar no questions asked to fight off a hoard of demobugs and made Steve feel sort of okay for the first time in weeks, and the Billy who'd flirted, kissed him, held him while they slept and told him with real conviction that they could make it work. But they weren't different Billys, were they? That was the problem. Steve knew that the Billy who'd taunted him and beat him to a pulp was the same one that was capable of putting all that fucking anger behind him, of smiling with genuine happiness and kissing Steve sweeter than he'd ever imagined he'd be capable of. He just wasn't sure Billy knew it.

He made a decision then, looking up at the dull glow of lamplight on his ceiling, and praying that it would stop all kinds of ungodly creatures from creeping into the corners of his vision. A decision that, even if Billy didn't remember, things weren't going to go back to the way they were before; indifference at best and a lingering grudge at worst. Because even if Billy really didn't remember any of it, if none of it was real and it was also some fucked-up wish fulfilment in Steve's head, there was still that moment before they'd been taken. The one where'd they'd stood side by side over the pile of dead demobugs and Billy had smiled at him, honestly and without agenda, and Steve had felt a little lift in his chest, the easing of a tight weight he'd been carrying since he'd set foot in those tunnels last November. And maybe he was clutching at straws, maybe it would all come to nothing and leave him even more fucked up than before. But it was a

chance he was going to take, if it meant getting Billy to smile at him like that again, of getting that weight to lift away a little more .

Notes for the Chapter:

Does Billy remember and he's just kidding himself?
Does he really not remember anything at all? I know what I think's going to happen, but I'm curious as to what you guys think too.

You know when you've written a whole bunch of fic for something, and each one has its own slightly different 'verse with tiny discrepancies, and then you can't remember which apply to which fic? Yeah, that.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

I've been neglecting this fic a little because there's a lot of other things I want to write for these two and just y'know, life. Also I've lowkey forgotten the details of what happened a few chapters ago so there's that.

There was a knock at Steve's door late that morning. He'd been up and dressed for a long while already, drunk three cups of coffee and toyed with a fourth as it got colder and colder until it was undrinkable, flipped through the TV channels and prodded at some overdue homework. By that point, anything was a welcome distraction, and he near enough jumped up out of his seat to answer the door. He trudged out through the hall, not really thinking about who it might be knocking, only that his mom had always impressed upon him how rude it was to leave someone waiting on the doorstep. Whoever it might have been, it was pretty safe to say he that hadn't expected Will Byers.

"Hi."

"Er, hey," Steve said, wondering if he'd missed a memo. Will blinked at him, tiny smile at the edge of his mouth, eyes wide as ever and shuffling a little where he stood as Steve looked down at him in confusion. "Shouldn't you be at school?"

"It's Saturday."

Oh. Shit. He'd been in a such a state since they'd been busted out of the lab that the days and nights had all sort of run together into one sleepless slog. "Then what are you doing here? I don't mean it like - any of you guys can come over any time you want, but just - did you need something?"

"Yeah," Will said, voice small and shy, but looking determined. "I asked Jonathan to drive me over," he said, and Steve looked up, belatedly noticing the creaking of Jonathan's fucking rustbucket of a

car as he turned it around in the driveway, "I wanted to talk to you. Y'know... about what happened."

"Oh," Steve said, rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck. He'd never spent much time - or any, really - with Will. There was no reason for him to; Will's mom or Jonathan usually drove him around, Steve mostly only ferried Dustin from A to B, sometimes Lucas too, and occasionally the whole lot of them. And the poor kid had always been... out of commission when he'd taken care of Upside Down stuff with the rest of the party. "You don't have to. I know it's got to be," he faltered, "y'know. A lot."

"Yeah," his smile flickered and he shrugged, small and quick. "But I want to. We thought it might help you feel better."

"Oh yeah?" Steve said, kind of touched that the kids had thought of him, and couldn't help but smile a little. Nosy dipshits. "Who says I need to feel better?"

"No one," Will said, "I just thought you looked sad, last time you dropped Dustin over. And I wondered if, after what happened, you were feeling a bit..." he hesitated.

"Crappy?"

His smile got wider again. "Yeah."

"Well, you're not wrong kiddo," Steve said on a sigh, "I might be a little off my game." Fucking understatement of the century. He stood to the side to let him in. "Come on in. Is uh, Jonathan coming too, or...?"

"No," Will shook his head, stepped past Steve, "he's going over to - I mean, he's going out."

"Sure," Steve said. And right enough, Jonathan threw a wave and a thin smile at the pair of them before he set off back down the drive. Steve returned it, and followed Will into the house. "You want anything?" he said, still a bit thrown off by the whole thing, but his mom's voice in his head keeping him on track, telling him that the first thing to do was offer a visitor a drink. "Coke, milk, juice?"

"Coke would be cool."

"You want a float?" Steve said on impulse. "Pretty sure I got some ice cream in the freezer."

"Yeah," Will said, smiling from where he'd perched himself at the counter, "thanks."

Steve sorted their drinks out, and sat down heavily across the counter from Will. They sipped at the floats for a while, Steve watching the ice cream melt and kinda waiting on Will to kick things off. It didn't take him long.

"So, um," he prodded at the vanilla ice cream bobbing in the glass, "you're okay, right?"

"Yeah," Steve said before he could let himself think too much on whether that was a lie or not, "I'm doing okay, kid."

"I don't believe you." He didn't say it unkindly; Steve was pretty sure that kid couldn't have been mean if he tried. But he said it sincerely enough that Steve couldn't outright lie to him about it - he deserved more than that from him, after all the shit he'd already had to deal with.

"Shit, okay," he pushed his hair back off his face, "look, I've been having nightmares and whatever since last November anyway. I'm kinda used to it. Just... since last week, they've kicked up a couple notches." And most troubling of all, now featured a bloodied up Billy Hargrove alongside all the other shit, but Will didn't need to know that. "But it's - I'm okay. It's nothing I can't handle."

"Really?" Will looked sceptical. And yeah okay, Steve couldn't blame him, he was a shitty liar.

"Look short stuff, I can take care of myself, alright?" He'd been doing it on and off since he was ten, and his parents had decided that was old enough to be left alone for the day for the first time. "Besides, it's nothing compared to what you went through buddy. Where I went... it wasn't even a real place." He'd feel like a royal dick for kicking up a fuss about how much of a shitty time he was having to Will Byers of

all people after all the crap he'd gone through. He was braver than Steve could ever be.

"I'm getting better now though," Will said, wiping a smudge of ice cream off his cheek, "because I talk about it a lot. With mom, Jonathan, with Mike and El. I dunno, I just thought talking about it might help you too."

"I get it," Steve said. "It's really cool of you to try and help me out, y'know."

"That's okay." Will smiled again, before he hesitated and it dropped into a frown. "So, if it's not that, then what is it?"

"What's what?"

"If it's not the Upside Down stuff, then what's been making you look so sad all week?"

Suddenly, keeping up the pretence that everything was fine felt like too much effort, and he slumped in his seat. "Look," he said, hoping that if he asked nicely enough, Will might just let it drop, "don't worry about it, I - "

"Is it Billy?"

"What?"

"Because I already talked to him about it too."

"*What?*" Steve repeated, feeling about ten steps behind everybody else yet again.

"Max asked me to," Will said quietly, still steadily looking Steve in the eye. "She made him wait when he drove her over to my mom's the other day. I don't think he wanted to talk either."

Yeah, no shit. "What, uh," Steve looked away, picked at his thumbnail, "what did he say?"

Will shrugged. "Not much. But he promised he'd talk to me more, if he needed."

"Oh." Something in him was disappointed that that was all Billy'd said. But really, what else had he expected, after how Billy'd shut down his attempts to talk about it too.

"Yeah. Well, that and that he thought the vines were creepy as shit."

"Yeah, I gotta agree with him there..." Wait. Steve's attention snapped back up to where Will was watching him anxiously. "He said *what*?"

"Sorry," Will flushed a little and looked away, apparently feeling bad about cursing in front of him, which made absolutely no fucking sense, but then, Will was a good kid. "That was what he said, I was just - "

"He remembers?"

Will frowned at him again, confused. "Well, yeah. Of course he does. Why wouldn't he?"

"Right." Steve stared at the counter-top, tried not to let how fucking hurt he felt show on his face. The fuck did Billy mean by telling him he didn't remember any of it? Was it just an easy way to brush Steve off, get rid of him? Was it all just too much for him to handle, so he was trying to ignore it in the hopes it went away? Steve knew that one well. Perhaps he really hadn't meant any of it, and Steve once again cursed his tendency to fall too hard too fast. It could have been any number of reasons, ones that probably only made sense to Billy, fucking ridiculous prick that he was. "I gotta go pick up Dustin soon," he heard himself say, instead of any of the other thoughts tripping over each other in his head, "if you want a lift."

"If you're sure that's - "

"It's fine, kid," Steve forced a smile. "Finish up your float, I gotta go get changed."

"Okay."

Once Steve was alone upstairs, he stood in the middle of his room, and waited to freak out. But it didn't happen. Perhaps he'd already done enough, had finally turned a corner and gotten back on track, because he actually felt a strange sort of calm. A weird, too-still sort

of feeling. Like he was suspended, a deep breath before jumping into a pool, like someone had hit pause on him. He'd take that for now, and figure the rest out later. One thing was for sure though - the decision Steve had made a couple of days ago that he'd make things right with Billy went right out of the window, because the complete fucking bastard had lied to him. And if he could forget about all of it; about the one fragment of happiness in that fucked up place and the tiny thrill of hope Billy's crooked smile had made him feel in the real world, then so could Steve.

#

It was in the parking lot behind the grocery store that Billy eventually chose to speak to him. It was almost dark, and Steve could barely remember what he'd just purchased as he dumped the paper bag on the front seat of his car. He knew there was coffee in there though, which was the main thing - he was still sleeping badly, surprise surprise, and coffee and packets of cookies were pretty much all that kept him going. A car door slammed across the lot and he flinched but didn't look up. Wasn't his business. He did look up though, when he heard the scuff of boots on asphalt coming towards him, only to see Billy stomping his way over, cigarette trembling between his fingers and expression stormy.

"Hey Harrington," he called out when he saw Steve watching him approach, "we need to talk."

"Do we?" Steve said coolly, rubbing at his face and feeling altogether too tired for Billy's shit, "you made it pretty clear there was nothing to talk about, Hargrove."

"I lied," Billy said, face carefully set in that same deep frown. He looked almost as rough as Steve felt, dark circles under his eyes and the rest of him pale under the shitty parking lot lights. "I remember all of it."

"I know," Steve said, the enjoyment he got out of the surprise on Billy's face pretty minimal, but he'd take his kicks where he could get them. "Will told me, you asshole."

"Shit," Billy spat. "The kid said he wouldn't tell."

"Yeah well, he shouldn't have had to," Steve said, that old anger he'd carefully put aside and had started to get past flaring back up again, "you should have just told me to start with instead of fucking lying to my face."

"Harrington - "

"How could you stand there and tell me you didn't remember any of it?" Steve said, fuming, hands clenched at his sides and nails biting his palms. Most of all, he was pissed that just as he was starting to feel a little better about it, Billy just had to rake it all up again. He'd wanted them both to pretend it hadn't happened, and that was what Steve was going to do. "You know what, I don't even want to hear it Billy, I'm going home." He turned his back on him, slammed the passenger door shut and walked around to the other side of the car.

"Wait," Billy said, tinge of desperation in his voice that Steve tried to ignore, "would you just - Steve!"

"What?!" he whirled around, stumbling back when he found himself almost nose to nose with Billy. "What could you possibly have left to say? You don't wanna remember? Fine. No complaints from me buddy, we'll just pretend it never happened, that's what you want, right?"

"No," Billy said, with enough conviction that it made Steve hesitate in his tirade. "See that's where you're wrong, pretty boy."

"Oh?" Steve crossed his arms, tried not to show how those words made him ache.

"I don't want to forget it," he said quietly, the angry lines of his face softening. "Honestly Harrington, those were some of the best days I've had in a long time, weird plant shit and fucked up bugs and all. But what I said in there still flies," Billy said, face hardening again, and Steve's stomach dropped. "We - " he waved his hand back and forth between them, "can't be a *thing*, for fuck's sake."

"Oh yeah? And why's that?" Steve said hotly, although honestly he wasn't feeling all that inclined to be with him right now anyway. "Enlighten me, Hargrove, because you didn't seem all that bothered

about it while my tongue was down your throat and your hands were in my pants."

"Because you didn't know who I was while we were in there," Billy yelled, catching the attention of a group of kids across the street, the change in volume making Steve wince. "Neither of us could remember. You didn't remember all the shit I'd said to you, and to the kids. You didn't remember what I did to your face." He broke off, looking honest to God like he was about to tear up, though his face was still set stiff and angry.

"Maybe not," Steve said evenly, "but you're the same person out here as you were in there, and so am I. I remember all the nasty shit you've done, Billy. And I remember the - the good stuff from the other place too. More than either of those things, I remember the look you gave me just before those government dickheads showed up, and I remember that it made me feel like - like - "

"Like what, Harrington?" Billy sneered, right up in his face again. "You think that just because I smiled at you once, and that we fucked in a make-believe shit hole, that we get to - what, hold hands and shit in the real world?" He shook his head. "That ain't how things work."

"Why the fuck not?" Steve said, pushed forward, getting all up in Billy's space right back, taking fleeting enjoyment in the way he had to take a step backwards. "Why shouldn't it work, huh? It meant something to me, you dick. That what you want me to say? *It meant something to me.* I thought it maybe meant something to you too, that perhaps you weren't a complete asshole, but obviously I was wrong about that. So just fuck off Hargrove, okay? And leave me alone."

He yanked open the driver side door to scramble back into the car, and Billy let him. Luckily it was late enough for the roads to be quiet, because he could barely see through the angry tears prickling at his eyes. He thumbed them away, and drove back home, with nothing but a long night of no sleep to look forward to.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, sorry about that. ONE MORE TO GO I'll fix things I promise.

There's an episode of Adventure Time where Lumpy Space Princess is covered in ants, and as she flicks them off she calls them by name, one is called Steven and one is called Billy. This has no relevance to anything, I just think about it a lot.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick, cheesy ending to this bad boy ;))

**Me
I'm the one you chose,
Out of all the people
You wanted me the most.
I'm so sorry that I've fallen
Help me up lets keep on running,
Don't let me fall out of love.**

#

Steve got through most of the next week by not thinking about it too much, which he only managed by just kind of powering through in a haze of tiredness. Not much new there. But now it was Friday night and he was dreading the weekend - as much as dragging himself to school was a pain in the ass, having an empty day stretching out in front of him was worse. And he hadn't seen Hargrove at school at all that week. Whether he'd just gotten really good at avoiding Steve or had skipped it altogether, Steve didn't know, but he was having an awful hard time not caring either way. He was staring blankly at the pile of homework on his bed and wondering if he was quite desperate enough to make a start on it, when the phone rang in the hall.

"Harrington residence," he didn't even feel like a jerk when he answered the phone like that anymore, his mom had been drilling the response into him for so long.

"Steve?" The voice in his ear was gruff and distorted by the line, but he'd know it anywhere. "That you?"

"...Billy?"

"Nah," a soft huff, like he was blowing smoke out the side of his mouth, forceful and impatient, "it's a demodog."

"Not funny," he said, sat down on the fancy chair his mom kept by the phone table that he wasn't really supposed to sit on. "How'd you get my number?"

"Got it from Max. She got it from that curly kid you drive around."

Oh. "Dustin."

"Whatever."

"What do you want?" Steve was going for annoyed, trying to summon up the anger from the last time they'd seen each other; it was easier to get his thoughts in line as far as Billy was concerned when he kept his focus on that. But mostly, he just sounded drained. He wasn't sure if it made him feel better or worse that Billy sounded just as wrung out when he answered.

"You."

"What?"

"Look I - " he cut himself off, grumbled something in frustration that Steve couldn't make out, "can you get away for a couple hours tonight?"

Steve snorted, cast a brief look over the deserted hallway, the open doors leading off to the empty living room and kitchen. His parents were still away. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Meet me at the grocery store parking lot."

"Really?" Given the fucking raging argument they'd had there last week, it hardly seemed like a good idea to meet there again. "There?"

"Yeah. There's somewhere I - just, yeah. That okay?" There was something fragile in Billy's voice, hesitant and so unlike him - or the version of him Steve had been dealing with ever since they came back from the lab - that Steve softened too.

"Sure. Half an hour?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. See you there."

#

Billy was already there when Steve drew into the lot, leaning against his car under the buzzing orange lights, smoking and twitchy, and Steve was wondering why the fuck he'd agreed, hadn't just told Billy to suck it. But that was kidding himself, he knew why he was there.

"If you're just going to yell at me again," Steve said as he approached, "then I'm going back home."

Billy looked up with a jerk, face a little slack like he was almost surprised to see him there at all. "I'll try not to." Then there was that tiny little flash of a smile, sincere and happy, and reminiscent of when he'd met Billy in the other place, and when he'd helped him beat the shit of the demobugs in the woods.

Steve's fingers flexed, like they wanted to grab a hold of his hand, hair, back pocket, whatever. "You uh, you got something to say?"

"Yeah," Billy said, put out his cigarette. Must have been important if it ranked above a smoke. "I fucked up."

"Yeah. Which time?"

"Fair question, Harrington," he said, smile sharp, shitty light catching his teeth, eyes, earring. "Too many to count. But I mostly mean the time I told you this couldn't happen." And as tired as Billy looked, he was still thrumming with that sort of dangerous energy that he always seemed to be, like he was two seconds away from punching something and getting the fuck out of there. The more Steve crossed paths with him, the more he was starting to suspect that it meant he was scared, or anxious, or impatient, just as much as angry.

"Right," Steve said, dull and flat even though his heart felt like it was about to flop right out of ribcage, "so what, you've changed your mind, right? After all that shit you gave me just for wanting to talk to you, after lying about remembering everything, and after telling me we could never work out, you've just changed your mind, and expect me to be cool with that?"

"Steve - "

"Just blow it all off and us shack up together like you didn't totally fuck me over and leave me to deal with all of this alone?" he shook his head. "Forget it." His head was screaming at him to just say yes and fuck the consequences, his mile wide impulsive streak acting up again, telling him to be selfish now and not care how much of a mess it would leave him in down the line.

"You said it yourself," Billy shrugged, arms crossed over his chest under his stupid too-thin denim jacket, the sort of shoulder jerk he'd acted out himself a hundred times before when he wanted it to look like he didn't care about something, "I'm an asshole. I'm fucked up. Something bad happens, I lash out. Something good happens, and I know it's going to get taken away, or I think I don't -" his voice cracked and he looked furious with himself, cringed and looked away - "I don't deserve it, and I lash out. I fuck it up before it fucks me up. And I don't want to fuck you up, Steve."

"Cute," Steve looked down at the asphalt, scuffed his shoe through the grit. "But why should I believe you?" He was dangerously close to doing so already.

"Because the guy you fell for, who fell for you in there, is me, idiot. Just with a little less baggage, or better at handling it, whatever." Billy swallowed, and Steve met his eyes again. "I want... to try for you, Steve. I never wanted to try for anyone before."

"Yeah? Bet you use that line all the time," Steve said with a grim smile, way more than half-in now, finding himself edging closer to the Camaro.

"No. I'm sorry it took me so long to say it to you though," Billy said. "And for being a dick again since we got back. I should have told you straight off that I remembered everything. It was just a lot, and - I know that doesn't fuckin' cut it but - "

"I can't hold that against you," Steve interrupted, because okay he was still pissed with Billy for a whole bunch of reasons, but anyone who went through what the two of them did in that lab would have come out the other side freaked out, bare minimum. "Other stuff

maybe. And yeah, you should have just fucking told me from the start you dipshit. But you can't help what they did to us. I'm sorry I got you dragged into that."

Billy laughed, loud and harsh in the deserted parking lot. "You got nothing to apologise to me for, Harrington." His smile dropped, mouth set tight and grim again, determined. "Look I know I'm askin' a lot after everything, but I want this, with you. When I said before that the world doesn't work like that? Well, stranger things have happened and all that shit, right?" He actually looked hopeful, and boy, that killed Steve more than anything he could have said.

"Keep talking."

"If we can make this work pretty boy, in whatever way we can, then why shouldn't we?" Billy said, mouth working, like every word was hard to get out. "It won't be perfect, I know that. I'm a dick."

"And I know *that*," Steve said.

Steve closed the rest of the distance to kiss him, soft and slow, in the middle of the dark and empty parking lot. Billy just stood there and let him, unmoving, before he suddenly gave under Steve's touch, surged forward and wrapped his arms around him, clutching at the back of his jacket. His mouth was cold, tasted of smoke. It was better than in the other place, more real in about every way imaginable.

"You'd better not be yankin' me, Hargrove," he said against Billy's lips, "in case you hadn't already guessed, I fall hard."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"So how are you going to start making up for how royally you screwed me over, huh?"

Billy snorted softly, leant forward to bump his lips to Steve's again. "I actually do have one idea to kick us off with the hundreds of ways I'm gunna show you just how gone I am on you, sweetheart."

"Yeah?" Steve said, trying to ignore how the endearment made his stomach jolt, his head light.

"Mhm. Get in the car, Harrington." Billy pulled away, turned his back to open up the passenger door.

"What?" Steve was still a little kiss-dazed, still tired as fuck, and confused about why Billy wasn't kissing him anymore.

"It's a little bit of a drive," he almost sounded apologetic. A night of many firsts, then.

"Right," Steve moved to climb into the car, head still trying to catch up, "okay."

The drive was sort of quiet, both of them silently reeling, Billy reaching over to take Steve's hand in his when he didn't need both on the wheel, fingers rough and warm. There was a kind of peacefulness to it, a lull between them, the relief after a storm's broken and the clouds parted, and you realise you've made it through. It was dark and quiet, their faces lit by the odd street light they drove under before they slid into darkness again, Steve biting his lip against the giddy smile that kept threatening to take him over. The music was down low, which was a change for Billy, but Steve appreciated it. He still wasn't convinced it wasn't all a vivid daydream born of sleep deprivation, or some freaky remnant from whatever they did to them at the lab making him see shit, but honestly he was too happy to care all that much.

#

"Where the hell are we?" Steve asked when they pulled up half an hour later, on the edges of the next town over, outside a crappy looking bar so unremarkable Steve had mistaken it for just another house.

"I wanted to take you someplace we could be together without worrying about other people," Billy said. "And somewhere that's actually real, this time."

"Alright," Steve said, trying to keep his cool, because that might be the nicest thing Billy'd ever done. Fuck it, definitely the nicest thing Billy'd ever done. "It looks like a fucking dive, though. Why here?" Obviously no one in the town would know who they were, but other

than that, it looked like just another shitty bar.

"It's um," Billy wrinkled his nose, "somewhere I might have visited a time or two before. It's okay for guys to be... together, here."

"What?" Steve said, still not quite following.

"Christ, you're dumb," Billy said under his breath, and Steve bristled.

"Hey - "

Then he reached out to take Steve's hand again, lacing their fingers together, Billy's warm palm against Steve's slightly clammy one, and looked up at him pointedly.

"Oh." Steve didn't even bother holding back his smile at that, squeezed Billy's hand.

Inside was just as grim as the outside, dark and kind of cramped, but it was just about the best place Steve could think of to be, right then. They danced together, space between them to start with, Steve dancing as exuberantly as he could, Billy almost bent double laughing. Then he got his own back, rolling his hips and popping another few buttons of his shirt, throwing his head back and smirking at Steve, knowing exactly how good he looked and not a bit afraid of milking it for all he was worth. Not about to be one-upped, Steve closed the gap between them, snuck an arm around Billy's middle to pull them up close. They swayed without paying the music much attention, Billy's hand moving down to grab at his ass, Steve slipping his hand into his back pocket in retaliation. Billy ducked forward to kiss at Steve's jaw, to call him baby, breathe in his air and let Steve push his hair back from his face to kiss him properly.

It was every bit as good, as heady, as the first time they'd danced together. But also infinitely better, because it was real this time. No weird vines or Upside Down shit crawling up the walls and in the cracks, no nosebleeds or fractured memories. The people around them were real, had faces, and not one of them was looking at them funny, or with contempt. Even if they were, Steve wasn't sure he'd care. And there were a hundred ways Steve could see it all going to hell, either at his or Billy's hand, or both, or neither. There was a lot

of shit stacked against them, a lot of things they'd have to work through, but like Billy had said earlier in the parking lot, he wanted to try. So that's what they'd do.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sooo, that's that. Thanks to anyone who stuck with this all the way through, and left kudos and comments and stuff, hearing your thoughts was a massive help with keeping me going on this one.

The Tumblr's eatingmoonflowers, if you have any questions or thoughts or whatever that you don't want to put on here :)